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Dr. Sydney Freeman, Jr.



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Monday, January 4, 2016

The Under-Realized Potential of Higher Education as a Field of Study Within and Beyond the U.S.

by *Sydney Freeman, Jr., Associate Professor at the University of Idaho, Dept. of Leadership & Counseling*

Anna Mountford-Zimdars, Senior Lecturer in Higher Education at King's College London, UK

The Great Recession that began in 2008 has had a profound influence on higher education sector, particularly in the western world. College and University tuition continues to rise as more students continue to seek access to the middle class through the attainment of higher education. Much of the US research that is influencing policy discussions centers around providing access to postsecondary education and students apart of historically marginalized groups. This is also happening at the same time that countries such as the United States is providing less financial support to the college and university sector. However, in other parts of the world, developing countries are increasing their investment in higher education. For example, Jordan views higher education as the one strategic investment the country can make into 'human capital': surrounded by neighbors rich in natural resources like oil, education is the one resource this country can provide for its own citizens and also for those from neighboring countries. Some of the non-western countries over the last 50 years have begun to develop higher education programs, centers, and institutes that prepare leaders for service in this sector (Rumbley, Altbach, Stanfield, Shimmi, de Gayardon, & Chan, 2014). Also these same entities develop research to inform higher education policy in their local context. What is interesting is that much of the growth of over the last five decades have been on the continents of Africa and South America, and in large countries such as China and Australia. Great growth in this sector is the product of these regions understanding that there are individual and societal benefits to developing a robust tertiary sector. As in North America, a strong higher education system is still seen as a stable route to upward mobility. China is expected to have more students in higher education than the United States by 2020.

Higher education as a field of study was founded in the United States. Over the 120 years since its inception more than 200 higher education graduate degree programs, institutes, and research centers have been established. However, there is a concern that while the largest programs, which are characterized by having more than eight full-time faculty continue growing, smaller less supported programs are shrinking and disappearing. On many campuses, the sentiments exist that higher education graduate program faculty expertise does not inform the decisions happening on campus. Some academic leaders are critical and even hostile towards such programs. Questions related to the relevance of the field and programs have gained traction.

A failure to communicate the value and relevance of our work to the current challenges facing our campuses has not been good for the field as a whole. Higher education experts and researchers can 'undersell' their skills and expertise by not highlighting what they can contribute or engaging in research that is too removed from practice to be relevant to practitioners. There have been cases where universities have hired outside firms and experts to help solve problems that higher education faculty on that same campus have the expertise to address. With all the conversation that has been bantered about regarding "translation" of research from scholars to policymakers. Too little of our work effects institutional, state, or national education policy. In many cases, expertise is sought from disciplinary experts in other fields. Although, we highly respect other disciplines and fields and believe they can provide a wealth of knowledge in solving higher education problems. We believe that it is important for higher education scholars to move from the margins of conversations that inform our work and take leadership in areas that intersect with our scholarship. Our teaching and scholarship should be practical, relevant and be able to be applied to challenges confronting the postsecondary sector. We should be viewed as social scientists who inform the study of the field of higher education.

Anyone is invited to submit material for consideration and submissions will be reviewed on an ongoing basis. We hope to receive material from graduate students, faculty members, and higher education practitioners, as well as collaborations among these. Guidelines for submission can be found under the *Guidelines for Submissions* tab on the main menu.

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This issue does not only apply to how scholarship is viewed. This also informs our preparation of the next generation of scholar-practitioners. Graduates of our programs should be highly sought after for positions in such areas as mid to senior level administration and education policy advisors. We should be preparing our students to communicate not only within our scholarly associations and periodicals, but with policymakers and general public. Although, we are proponents of generating knowledge for knowledge sake we also understand the necessity and the imperative that we provide our graduates with the knowledge, experiences and transferable skills that can help them secure employment beyond the professoriate and provide the skills for undertaking action research for the good of whatever graduates choose to do with their lives. Critical thinking and professional ethics should be at the center of our instruction. Teaching our students how to review and conduct academic research without undergirding it without modelling and displaying those traits will put our graduates at a disadvantage.

In the United Kingdom, a more positive story for higher education research is emerging. There is a vibrant community of higher education researchers and there has been a rise in employment opportunities within higher education for scholars interested in teaching and learning. Some Higher Education Departments are located in traditional Departments of Education and often work along linguists and those supporting teacher training in primary and secondary schools. Others are located in the growing central Learning and Teaching units - the main remit of these units is to support academic faculty and graduate students who teach to professionalise their practice. There has been a shift in consciousness among academics from viewing such units as a necessary evil and a 'conscript attitude' to participating in teaching development because such programmes are often tied to probation requirements, to a more curious and enhancement focused culture in approaching opportunities to develop teaching practices. Slowly, academics from a range of discipline appreciate that the idea of evidence-base and deep understanding are meaningful in learning and teaching and not only in their home disciplines, let it be physics, medicine, or modern languages.

In the UK, the increasing importance of teaching, even in leading research institutions, and the introduction of teaching-based promotions across the sector have helped to increase the salience of the teaching agenda. However, just as in the United States, the ability of these researchers to research, enhance and influence institutional practices can vary. In the most constructive and positive collaborations, academics collaborate with professional service staff and students as partners in the academic development processes to enhance the evidence-base and sharing for best practice and interventions. Academics in central learning and teaching units might collaborate with academic faculty in specific disciplines to undertake particular action research projects - there are also some national evaluations, often funded by central national bodies such as the Higher Education Academy or the Higher Education Research Councils.

Perhaps because of the smaller size of the United Kingdom, there are also ample opportunities for academics in the field to exchange and share their practices. Again, the best scenario here is a diffusion effect of academic practice that enhances the student experience and supports meaningful and inclusive higher education curricula. This ideal is not always met, but there are pockets of excellence and good practice that show that such constructive partnerships and collaborations between academics of different fields, professional service staff, and students are possible.

International comparisons help those with a strong legacy of institutions of higher education look at challenges with a fresh pair of eyes. We will see that scholarship can be the interconnective issue that can help us advance leadership and policy development internationally. However, a comparison with our European, or Australian neighbors is not where international work should stop. As our programs continue to grow around the world, we cannot afford for our scholarship to continue to Western-centric and need to engage with wider international discourses and developments.

For example, in western scholarship certain subjects such as governance and leadership may be close to saturation, but in developing countries there is a huge need for additional context specific knowledge developed in that area. Cross pollination in scholarship could help to shed light on ways to solve problems. In turn, US scholars can learn from other models of higher education where education is free - this is the case for Germany and Denmark. And Scandinavian countries pay their students to go to college. Also fundamental questions around institutional stratification become stranger when looked at through the lens of an outsider - indeed, there is nothing inevitable about the Anglo-Saxon model of hierarchical university system divided by prestige and alternative models exist. Furthermore, should we accept that prestige should be determined by how many students are excluded from participating in the higher education context, the competitiveness of entry and yield rates? Or should prestige be based around inclusion, how many previously under-served students higher education succeeds in reaching, and the added value or learning gains in higher education? Such alternative conceptualizations of prestige might turn some traditional university hierarchies upside down.

We believe that the field of higher education and those associated with its' programs are well positioned to advance leadership and policy development internationally. However, the research that we conduct must remain relevant and able to inform higher education policy and practice.

We need to prepare students with the knowledge, skills, and competencies that will help them solve complex challenges that may have international implications. We need to engage with international agendas and share practices and experiences with a view to enhance the public benefits of higher education as a field of study. Within our institutions and national contexts, we must be fearless in asserting our expertise in our local campus context and to the broader public and collaborate with university management and higher education sector body to be part of initiatives that can meaningful change and enhance higher education.

References

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Posted by [Adrianna Kezar](#) at 11:31 AM

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